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008

TRANSLATING MODAL VERBS WITH THE HELP OF TRANSLATION ENVIRONMENT

The case of *can*

The ways of expressing modal meanings are grammatically quite different in the case of such languages as English, Romanian, and Hungarian. As it is well known, English morphologically can be considered an analytic language while Hungarian is synthetic, since in most of the cases, the modality meaning is expressed morphologically with suffixes. English modality (cf. Palmer 1990) can be expressed with modal verbs (*can, could, may, might, must, shall, should, will, would*)¹, adverbs (*perhaps, obviously, probably, possibly, necessarily, maybe, etc.*), adjectives (*possible, necessary, etc.*), nouns (*necessity, consideration, etc.*), noun phrases (*far from necessary*), verbs (*wonder, order, etc.*), as well as, with some verbal moods (e.g. subjunctive mood in case of conditional clauses). But all these grammatical possibilities are not frequent in the same extent. We found that in English almost 75% of modal meanings are conveyed through modal verbs. Expressing modality with auxiliary verb is an analytical means, and thus the analytic characteristic of English is also manifested in the expression of modal meanings (cf. Benő 2011).

Contrary to English, in Hungarian, the synthetic way of presenting modality is of great importance since the suffix system of Hungarian as an agglutinative language is very varied. Such kind of morpheme is the derivative suffix for conditional mood: *-hat/-het* or the suffix *-na/-ne*. In Hungarian, the morphologically compound verbs with derivative suffix (*-hat/-het*) can be considered polysemous and they can be equivalent to many English modal structures. They can express:

1. probability (*Holnap eshet az eső. 'It may rain tomorrow.'*), that is an epistemic modality;
2. permission (*Itt parkolhatsz. 'You can park your car here'*) – deontic modality;
3. will, wish (*Várhatsz egy kicsit. 'You could wait a little'*) – buletic modality;
4. ability, inner possibility (*Most énekelhetek. 'Now I am able to sing'*) – dispositional modality;
5. referring to circumstances (*Nyáron majd kipihenheted magad. 'You can have a rest in summer'*) – circumstantial modality.

1 Semi-modal verbs belong to that category, too: *be able to, be allowed to / permitted to, have to, ought to, need, dare, be to, be bound to*.

In Hungarian, there are also analytical means of denoting modal meanings: auxiliary verbs (*akar* 'will', *fog* 'will' or 'shall', *kell* 'must', 'have to', *szeretne* 'to wish', *tud* 'to be able', etc.), adverbs (*bárcsak* 'if only', *talán* 'maybe', *remélhetőleg* 'hopefully', etc.), modal phrases and clauses (e.g. *minden valószínűség szerint* 'it is very probable that...'; *igaz, hogy* 'it is true that...'; *úgy vélem* 'I consider').

According to our research, in most of the cases, the synthetic means are dominant in Hungarian. We found that 52% of the modal meanings are expressed with morphologically compound verbs containing suffixes, bound morphemes in Hungarian translated texts (Benő 2011, Benő–Rác 2011). The following linguistic data illustrate these cases:

A voice cannot carry the tongue and the lips that give it wings.

A hang nem viheti magával a nyelvet és ajkat, amely szárnyat adott neki.

People of Orphalese, of what can I speak save of that which is even now moving your souls?

Orphalese népe, mi másról is beszélhetnék, mint arról, ami éppen most mozdul meg a lelketekben?

(...) I cannot withdraw from them without a burden and an ache.

(...) nem vonulhatok vissza tőlük a fájdalom súlya nélkül.²

In Romanian, in most of the cases, the modality is conveyed through modal auxiliary verbs, similarly to English: *poate* 'is able', *pot* 'can', *se pare* 'to seem', *trebuie* 'must', *ar trebui* 'ought to', a *îndrăzni* 'dare'. Thus, in Romanian, the analytical grammatical means are dominant for the expression of modality, as in most of the Indo-European languages.

According to Palmer, English modal verbs are 'extremely messy' (1990. 49.), and he does not believe that there is a 'basic meaning' regarding modal verbs. As we are primarily interested in modals from the point of view of translation, it is worth considering their possible meanings, even if we accept that there is no basic meaning. Palmer (1990. 3–4.) establishes 7 criteria for differentiating modal verbs from other (primary auxiliary) verbs, which includes their behaviour in interrogative and negative forms, as well as, their formal characteristics. However, for teaching purposes, the description of modals should be simplified, but it should be rigorously analysed for translating purposes.

Modality is the grammaticalized expression of the subjective attitudes and opinions of the speaker including possibility, probability, predictability, necessity, obligation, permissibility, ability, desire, and contingency, and it is external to the content, being part of the attitude taken up by the speaker (Halliday 1970. 349., cited by Greere–Zdrengea 2000. 29.). Modals and 'quasi-modals' are used to express hypothetical meanings such as possibility, futurity, necessity, obligation, ability, intention, permission, and assertion (Greere – Zdrengea 2000. 33, 91); thus, the most flexible concept of modalization must include both of them. Kosur (2009: 1) also

2 The cited sentences are taken from the novel Kahlil Gibran: *The Prophet* and its Hungarian translation: *A próféta* (translated by Tamás Révbíró).

states that modal verbs are not the only grammatical categories expressing modality as in modern English both modal verbs and grammatical mood are defined as a set of inflected verb forms that express modality of an action or state (cf. Benő 2011).

From the point of view of translation, we are primarily interested whether feeding samples of modal verbs into the translation memory (full sentences) and the term base (words and expressions) enables us to enhance productivity or not.

***Can* in translation environment**

Modal sentences cannot be understood at all apart from considerations of their anchored nature in some social context (Greere–Zdrengea 2000. 13.), which seems to leave no hope for computer-assisted translations (CAT) as no one can expect from a software to take environment into consideration. Nevertheless, these programmes can take into consideration the immediate ‘context’ of the sentence in question, which means that the sentences prior and after are also checked (*MemoQ Help*).

The problem Fillmore presents (cf. 1973. 111.) – either the polite or the ironical meaning of a modal verb – can be tackled, at least partially, by feeding into the translation memory and term base as many instances as possible for the translator to select the most appropriate meaning. As large databases are collections of human-translated texts fed into translation memories and term bases, unfortunately, these can be of either top quality or poor one as in many cases it is difficult to check the source.

Thanks to Kilgray’s Academic License Programme, *MemoQ* translation environment is available for study at Sapientia University. The environment contains three main columns: the left column shows the source text, the second the target text, whereas the third one shows the translation results (matches).

We started our investigation by extracting *can* from a collection of about 1,000 sentences containing English modal verbs (source: Asimov’s *Foundation*, a database created by P. Keresztesi and A. Imre), out of which 151 sentences contained various forms of *can*: 100 in affirmative, 65 in negative (*can’t* and *cannot*), 23 in interrogative (15 instances of ... *can*..., and 8 instances of *Can*... ?, as translation environments handle small and capital letters differently):

1. Instances of *can*

Type	Instances	Percentage
Affirmative <i>can</i>	91	47.39%
Negative <i>can</i> (<i>can’t</i> , <i>cannot</i>)	67	34.89%
Interrogative <i>can</i>	29	15.1%
Interrogative-negative <i>can</i>	5	2.6%
Total	192	100%

As in the case of any other modal verb, we could easily detect at least three possibilities when modals are translated (Imre–Benő 2011):

1. The modal verb is preserved in the translation:

*Of course, you **can**.* → *Bineînțeleasă că **poți**.* (Ro)

*Psychohistory, which **can** predict the fall, **can** make statements concerning the succeeding dark ages.* → *A pszichohistória, amely meg **tudja** jósolni a bukást, arra is **képes**, hogy mondjon valamit a rákövetkező sötét korszakokról.* (Hu)

2. The modal verb is partially lost in the translation as only the suffix signals its original presence:

*Of course, you **can**.* → *Persze, hogy megteheted.* (Hu)

3. The modal verb is completely lost in the translation (cf. polite requests):

Can I get you a drink? → *Să-ți aduc ceva de băut? Bei ceva?* (Ro)

As a preliminary result, it is easy to suspect that it is not worth the effort saving *can* into a database as even in the first case, the Romanian and Hungarian words are too short (either 3 or 5 characters). This is further complicated by the fact that when Romanian verbs are conjugated, the endings contain language specific diacritical marks (*t* with cedilla), or even the root word is altered (*pot*, *poți*, *puteți*). At first sight, translating *can* into Hungarian is more successful (the root *tud* does not change), but we should take into consideration all the possible conjugated forms (*tudok*, *tudsz*, *tud*, *tudjuk*, *tudjátok*, *tudják*), let alone subjective and transitive (objective) paradigm (*tudom* – *tudok*). As matches are shown in the third column of *MemoQ* (see above), one will easily realize that we are going to have too many hits (too much time to check the correct one), and it is much easier to type the proper word. A possible improvement might be to save *can* together with the preceding personal pronoun, but this involves further problems: for instance, capital letters (cf. beginning of sentences), inserted words between the personal pronoun and *can* (in which case we will find no matches), or the possibility of replacing *he*, *she*, *it* with any other noun (Imre–Benő 2011).

Grammar books describe *can* with various functions, such as *ability* (physical, mental), *possibility*, *basic senses* (*I **can** see you.*), *impolite requests*, *mild commands/ suggestions* and *giving permission* (Palmer 1990, Bădescu 1984). If negative forms are considered (*can't*, *cannot*), we can also add *impossibility*, or *logical deduction*. It is worth noticing that not a single case of *can't* + *have* + *past participle* form was found, so the next stage was to check, which words in Romanian and Hungarian tend to appear when translating *can* in affirmative, negative, and interrogative (Imre–Benő 2011):

2. *Can* affirmative

<i>can</i> affirmative – 91 instances					
Romanian	Nr.	Percent	Hungarian	Nr.	Percent
<i>poate</i>	21	23.07%	<i>tud</i>	17	18.68%
<i>pot</i>	16	17.58%	<i>képes</i>	3	3.29%
<i>putem</i>	7	7.69%	<i>lehet</i>	15	16.48%
<i>(ar; veți) putea</i>	6	6.59%	<i>-hat, -het</i>	29	31.86%
<i>poți</i>	7	7.69%	lost	27	29.67%
<i>puteți</i>	5	5.49%	-	-	-
lost	31	34.06%	-	-	-

The table above clearly shows that around one third of *can* is 'lost' in translation. Some examples are:

You can accuse him. → *Găsești tu vreo acuzație.* (Ro)

I can see that. → *Én is látom.* (Hu)

The Romanian *poate* and *pot* represent around 40%; the other Romanian words are negligible. The Hungarian *-hat* and *-het* are suffixes, which are not worth saving into a database; *tud* and *lehet* stand for around 35%, but in some cases, they only represent the root of the word (*tudok*, *lehetséges*).

These were completed with interrogative and negative forms as well (including shortened forms), taking into consideration that negation may refer to either the meaning of the modal or to the meaning of the main verb (Palmer 1968. 105.). Greere-Zdrengea (2000. 92.) say that 'it is obvious that negation, questioning, emphasis and combinations of these three processes result in changes of meaning that are not immediately predictable from the negation or questioning or traditionally accepted content of modals'. Although we did not detect spectacular changes in meaning, from our point of view, the results were rather discouraging. *Cannot* and *can't* were translated 11 times as *nu poate* and 11 times as *nu pot* into Romanian (altogether 32.83%); the rest is not useful, as only 1 or 2 instances were found, or in the majority of the cases, there are further words between *nu* and the conjugated form of *a putea* (mostly personal and reflexive pronouns). The Hungarian translation is much less encouraging: 31 instances contain the *-hat* and *-het* suffixes, and we could only find 6 cases of *nem lehet* and 5 cases containing the negative *nem* and the root *tud*. The problem is further complicated as both Romanian and Hungarian express negation with more than one word (Romanian: *nu*, *n-o*, *n-aș*; Hungarian: *nem*, *sem*, *sose*, *-talan*, *-telen*).

We should also bear in mind that even the English negative is not always expressed by *can't* or *cannot*, as in the examples below:

I can make nothing of all this. → *Nu pot așă ceva.* (Ro)

You can scarcely ... → *Ez még nem jelent semmit.* (Hu)

He can scarcely fail to realize... → *Nu reușește să înțeleagă.* (Ro)

Even if ‘*can scarcely*’ refers to negation (cf. ‘minimizers,’ Quirk et al. 1972), translators may become very inventive when translating:

There can scarcely be any doubt. → *Dincolo de orice bănuială.* (Ro)

A further interesting case is when antonym translation is activated, during which an English negative is turned into interrogative:

You can’t maintain discipline that way. → *Ki tud így fegyelmet tartani?*

Whereas the interrogative-negative forms are completely irrelevant from the point of view of the term base, the interrogative *can* is slightly better than the negative and can be added to *can* affirmative to improve the percentage (cf. *poate, poți, tud, lehet*):

3. *Can* interrogative

<i>can</i> interrogative – 29 instances					
Romanian	Nr.	Percent	Hungarian	Nr.	Percent
<i>poate</i>	7	24.13%	<i>-hat, -het</i>	10	34.48%
<i>poți</i>	7	24.13%	<i>lehet(ne)</i>	4	13.79%
<i>pute</i> – root (<i>aș/ am putea</i> <i>puteți, putem</i>)	10	34.48%	<i>tud</i> – root (<i>tudja, tudna,</i> <i>tudjuk</i>)	8	27.58%

Conclusion

Although it may come difficult to accept, based on the above analysis, it is not worth adding various forms of *can* to a Romanian or Hungarian term base. Although English grammars describe many cases of *can*, few of them appear in Romanian and Hungarian. There are many negative possibilities in all three languages, but they – evidently – do not coincide (cf. Benő 2011). However, translating modal verbs into Romanian is more satisfactory than translating them into Hungarian, for at least two reasons:

1. Passive constructions (*can be* + adjective) work well in Romanian: *poate fi* or *pot fi*, whereas Hungarian uses suffixes (*-hat, -het*);

2. Expressing ability, possibility, and permission in Romanian is possible with the same verb (*a putea*), even if with different forms (some of them coincide: *eu/ ei/ ele pot fi*) whereas in Hungarian, *tud, képes* is used for ability, *lehet* and the suffixes *-hat, -het* are used for possibility and permission (Imre–Benő 2011).

During the period between 2009 and 2011, we investigated the translation possibilities of various modal verbs from English into Romanian and Hungarian, but up to now *can* is one of the ‘worst’ modal verbs as far as translation is concerned. However, the productivity of translation environments may show from a different angle; even the developers of *MemoQ* accept that productivity

in the case of non-technical texts is only 10-30% (*MemoQ Quick Start Guide* 2011). This percentage is further enhanced by the excellent quality, which is characteristic for CAT-tools in case that correct data input is provided; and even if during a later translation, a previous error is observed, there is a possibility to correct it at any time. We are confident that the larger the database regarding the English texts containing *can*, the better results may be achieved. For instance, legal texts or subtitles offer a very promising ground for analysis as there are standardized translations or they contain repetitive texts above average.

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